**Introduction—Linking The Environment And Poverty**

Many readers are probably familiar with the tale of four blind men being asked to identify the object in front of them. Each blind man just investigated a part so no one identified the whole as an elephant. Similarly, both environmental degradation and poverty alleviation are urgent global issues that have a lot in common, but are often treated separately. This article explores some of these linkages.

Both environmental degradation and poverty alleviation are urgent global issues that have a lot in common, but are often treated separately. Consider the following:

* Human activities are resulting in mass species extinction rates higher than ever before, currently approaching 1000 times the normal rate;
* Human-induced climate change is threatening an even bleaker future;
* At the same time, the inequality of human societies is extreme:
  + The United Nations 1998 Human Development Report reveals that, “Globally, the 20% of the world’s people in the highest-income countries account for 86% of total private consumption expenditures—the poorest 20% a minuscule 1.3%”
  + To highlight this inequality further, consider that approximately 1 billion people suffer from hunger and some 2 to 3.5 billion people have a deficiency of vitamins and minerals
  + Yet, some 1.2 billion suffer from obesity
  + One billion people live on less than a dollar a day, the official measure of poverty
  + However, half the world — nearly three billion people — lives on less than two dollars a day.
  + Yet, just a few hundred millionaires now own as much wealth as the world’s poorest 2.5 billion people.
* Sources: [Poverty facts and statistics](http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats); [Loss of Biodiversity](http://www.globalissues.org/EnvIssues/Biodiversity/Loss.asp); [Climate change and global warming](http://www.globalissues.org/EnvIssues/GlobalWarming/Intro.asp).

Issues about environment, economics and politics are inter-related through the way humans interact with their surroundings and with each other.

Biological diversity allows a variety of species to all [work together](http://www.globalissues.org/EnvIssues/Biodiversity/WhoCares.asp) to help maintain the environment without costly human intervention. We benefit because the environment sustains us with the variety of resources produced.

However, there is often a mainstream belief that for poor countries to develop, environmental concerns have to be sacrificed, or is a luxury to address once poverty is alleviated.

Therefore, the approaches to such issues require rethinking. The overloaded phrase “sustainable development” must recognize the interconnectedness between human beings and the environment if true environmental and social justice is to be obtained.

As Delhi-based environment organization, the Centre for Science and Environment, [points out](http://www.gobartimes.org/may2000/gtimes_cov1.htm#Think), if the poor world were to develop and consume in the same manner as the West to achieve the same living standards, “we would need two additional planet Earths to produce resources and absorb wastes … and good planets are hard to find!”

Back to top

**The Impact Of Poverty On The Environment**

[Poverty](http://www.globalissues.org/issue/2/causes-of-poverty) and [third world debt](http://www.globalissues.org/issue/28/third-world-debt-undermines-development) has been shown to result in resource stripping just to survive or pay off debts.

For example, Nepal and Bangladesh have suffered from various environmental problems such as increasingly devastating floods, often believed to be resulting from large-scale deforestation.

Forests around the world face increased pressures from timber companies, agricultural businesses, and local populations that use forest resources.

Some environmentalists, from rich nations especially, also raise concerns about increasing populations placing excessive burdens on the world’s resources as the current major source of environmental problems.

This makes for a worrying situation for third world development and poverty alleviation. However, an environment-only approach risks “blaming the victims.” While humans are largely responsible for many problems of the planet today, not all humans have the same impact on the environment. It is important to consider, for example, that the consumption of just the worlds wealthiest fifth of humanity is so much more than the rest of the world, as highlighted at the beginning.

© Centre for Science and Environment [Campaign on Forests](http://www.cseindia.org/html/cmp/cmp23.htm)

Thus, putting emphasis on population growth in this way is perhaps over-simplistic. However, this does not mean we can be complacent about future population burdens. Sustainability is critical for the world’s majority to develop without following the environmentally damaging processes of the world’s currently industrialized nations.

Also adding to the complexity is that resource usage is not necessarily fixed. That is, while there may be a finite amount of say oil in the ground, we may have not discovered it all, and further, overtime the use of those resources may increase in efficiency (or inefficiency). This means a planet could sustain a high population (probably within some limits) but it is a combination of things like how we use resources, for what purpose, how many, how the use of those resources change over time, etc, that defines whether they are used inefficiently or not and whether we will run out of them or not.

Back to top

**The Impact Of Richer Nations On The Environment**

The relationship between the rich and poor, and the impacts on the environment go deep. Economics is meant to be about efficient allocation of resources to meet everyone’s needs. However, international power politics and ideologies have continued to influence policies in such a way that decision-making remains concentrated in the hands of a few narrow interests. The [result](http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Consumption.asp) is that the world’s resources are allocated to meet a few people’s wants, not everyone’s needs.

Indian activist and scientist, Vandana Shiva, shows in her work that many people have been forced into poverty due to politics and economics such as concentrated land rights, pressure from industry to exploit the environment in ways that destroy diversity and affect local populations, etc. Shiva also highlights that the poor often have a lot of knowledge about their environment and are often sustainers and efficient users of it, as they recognize their link to it for their survival.

Excessive third world debt burden has meant that it has been harder to prioritize on sustainable development. Unfair debt, imposed on the third world for decades by the global institutions, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank through their harsh [Structural Adjustment](http://www.globalissues.org/article/3/structural-adjustment-a-major-cause-of-poverty) programmes (SAPs) have opened up of economies rapidly, in socially, politically, environmentally and economically destructive ways, while requiring a prioritization on debt repayment and cut backs on health, education and other critical services. They have encouraged concentration on producing just a few cash crops and other commodities primarily for export, using very environmentally damaging “industrial agriculture”, which reduces biodiversity, requiring costly inputs such as environmentally damaging pesticides and fertilizers to make up for the loss of free services a diverse farm ecosystem would provide, and as Vandana Shiva charges,

has destroyed diverse sources of food, and it has stolen food from other species to bring larger quantities of specific commodities to the market, using huge quantities of fossil fuels and water and toxic chemicals in the process. … Since cattle and earthworms are our partners in food production, stealing food from them makes it impossible to maintain food production over time….

… More grain from two or three commodities arrived on national and international markets, but less food was eaten by farm families in the Third World.

The gain in “yields” of industrially produced crops is based on a theft of food from other species and the rural poor in the Third World. That is why, as more grain is produced and traded globally, more people go hungry in the Third World. Global markets have more commodities for trading because food has been robbed from nature and the poor.

— *Vandana Shiva, Stolen Harvest, (South End Press, 2000), pp. 12-13*

Mainstream economists and politicians have long been criticized for concentrating on economic growth in ways that ignores humanity and the environmental costs. Perhaps one of the harshest ironies is how food and farm products flow from areas of hunger and need, to areas where money and demand is concentrated. Farm workers, and women especially, are amongst the worlds most hungry.

It is not just a problem in agriculture but other industries too. In 1991, then Chief Economist for the World Bank, Larry Summers, (and later U.S. Treasury Secretary, under the Clinton Administration), had been a strong backer of the disastrous SAPs. He wrote a leaked internal memo in 1992, revealing the extent to which international policies have an impact on nations around the world when it comes to environmental and other considerations:

Just between you and me, shouldn’t the World Bank be encouraging more migration of dirty industries to the LDCs [less developed countries]? … The economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable, and we should face up to that… Under-populated countries in Africa are vastly under-polluted; their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low compared to Los Angeles or Mexico City… The concern over an agent that causes a one in a million change in the odds of prostate cancer is obviously going to be much higher in a country where people survive to get prostate cancer than in a country where under-five mortality is 200 per thousand.

— *Lawrence Summers, Let them eat pollution, The Economist, February 8, 1992. Quoted from Vandana Shiva, Stolen Harvest, (South End Press, 2000) p.65; See also Richard Robbins, Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism (Allyn and Bacon, 1999), pp. 233-236 for a detailed look at this.*

For years, rich countries have been migrating some polluting industries to poor countries, but still producing primarily for rich countries. This has been possible insofar as it is cheaper than to pay for costly environmentally clean technologies that people demand.

Back to top

**Diverting Resources To Non-Productive Uses**

It is perhaps natural to assume that we are growing food to feed people, but are struggling to keep up. Reasons are frequently attributed to the effects that rapid population growth places of poor countries as the ultimate cause. However, we make [more than enough food](http://www.globalissues.org/EnvIssues/Population/Hunger.asp) to keep up with population growth, although environmentally damaging industrial agriculture threatens future sustainability.

Yet how is it that there is so much hunger, and that farm workers are usually the hungriest people in the world?

An indication of the answer lies in what is less discussed in the mainstream: the purpose of agriculture in today’s world. Like many other markets, food is available to those who can afford it, not necessarily those who need it. Most food is therefore produced to meet consumer demands, not the needs of the poor or hungry. When money talks, the poor have no voice.

This leads to a major diversion, and even wastage, of environmental resources from productive uses to [non-productive uses](http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Poverty/Hunger/Causes.asp). For poor countries that need to earn foreign exchange to pay off huge debts, cash crops offer the chance of money. For elite landowners, this is the only way they can make money, as the poor have little. As professor of anthropology, Richard Robbins, summarizes:

To understand why people go hungry you must stop thinking about food as something farmers grow for others to eat, and begin thinking about it as something companies produce for other people to buy.

* Food is a commodity. …
* Much of the best agricultural land in the world is used to grow commodities such as cotton, sisal, tea, tobacco, sugar cane, and cocoa, items which are non-food products or are marginally nutritious, but for which there is a large market.
* Millions of acres of potentially productive farmland is used to pasture cattle, an extremely inefficient use of land, water and energy, but one for which there is a market in wealthy countries.
* More than half the grain grown in the United States (requiring half the water used in the U.S.) is fed to livestock, grain that would feed far more people than would the livestock to which it is fed. …

The problem, of course, is that people who don’t have enough money to buy food (and more than one billion people earn less than $1.00 a day), simply don’t count in the food equation.

* In other words, if you don’t have the money to buy food, no one is going to grow it for you.
* Put yet another way, you would not expect The Gap to manufacture clothes, Adidas to manufacture sneakers, or IBM to provide computers for those people earning $1.00 a day or less; likewise, you would not expect ADM (“Supermarket to the World”) [A large food processing company] to produce food for them.
* What this means is that ending hunger requires doing away with poverty, or, at the very least, ensuring that people have enough money or the means to acquire it, to buy, and hence create a market demand for food.

— *Richard H. Robbins,* [*Readings on Poverty, Hunger, and Economic Development*](http://faculty.plattsburgh.edu/richard.robbins/legacy/hunger_readings.htm)

In addition to minor nutritional quality, or damaging consumer’s health, some major agricultural products also involve production practices that damage the health and safety of workers and the environment.

For example, rainforests are often cleared to make way for grazing animals to be slaughtered for unhealthy fast food meat consumption, while prime land and the surrounding environment is often degraded when producing cash crops for the wealthier parts of the world. The effects are numerous. Vandana Shiva also captures this issue:

Junk-food chains, including KFC and Pizza Hut, are under attack from major environmental groups in the United States and other developed countries because of their environmental impact. Intensive breeding of livestock and poultry for such restaurants leads to deforestation, land degradation, and contamination of water sources and other natural resources. For every pound of red meat, poultry, eggs, and milk produced, farm fields lose about five pounds of irreplaceable top soil. The water necessary for meat breeding comes to about 190 gallons per animal per day, or ten times what a normal Indian family is supposed to use in one day, if it gets water at all.

… Overall, animal farms use nearly 40 percent of the world’s total grain production. In the United States, nearly 70 percent of grain production is fed to livestock.

— *Vandana Shiva, Stolen Harvest, (South End Press, 2000), pp. 70-71.*

Side Note»

Industries such as the fast food industry benefit from people consuming more fast food meats and sugar-based products. Excessive consumption of coffee, alcohol, tobacco, etc, place an extra burden on the poor and on environmental resources, both in production of these products as well as at the other end, where health departments are already strained.

Yet this all contributes to economic measures such as Gross National Product. Economists and politicians look at these to see how well their policies are faring. Selling more sugary products or fast foods to children and adults results in more sales! Many environmental costs are either not accounted for or only partly so. For example, if the full cost of water by the meat industry in the United States was accounted for, common hamburger meat would cost [$35 a pound](http://www.commondreams.org/views01/0629-06.htm)!

We end up in a situation where 1 billion suffer from hunger, while another [billion suffer from obesity](http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Consumption/Effects.asp).

Back to top

**Environment And Poverty Are Related Issues**

The above just scratches the surface, but highlights the interconnectedness of humanity, the environment and all other forms of life. We cannot take the environment for granted. Humanity has a responsibility not only to each other, but to the environment as well, as the environment has long sustained us and can only continue to do so if we do not destroy it.

Technological solutions, such as more environmentally friendly technologies, while extremely important, do not address underlying political, social and economic causes. Just as doctors highlight the need to prevent illnesses in the first place, and resort to cures when needed, so too do we need to understand these deeper issues in a more holistic manner. The interconnectedness needs more recognition if environmental degradation, poverty and other global problems can begin to be addressed.

Concentrating on one dimension without others is similar to those blind men looking at just a part of the elephant. A form of environmentalism that ignores humanity as an integral part of the solution, of economic dogma that forgets about our basic needs, and of forms of development that ignore environmental concerns all add up to numerous problems for the world’s people and fragile ecosystems. Some of these problems are so big we do not even see them even when we think our eyes are open.

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Back to top